

The Effects and Functions of Setting in Margaret Atwood's

Alias Grace

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Abstract: This paper discusses the importance of integral setting — time, place, and social environment — in Margaret Atwood's historiographical novel *Alias Grace*. I have utilized four different functions of setting — referential function (reality direct telling), Verisimilitudinous function (imitating the real world), symbolic function (indirect telling), and analogical function (comparison between setting and character) to closely examine the setting's effect of shaping and controlling the main female characters' (Grace, Mary and Nancy) personalities and behavior. As Grace moves through the different settings of the story (the Parkinson's household, the Kinnear Estate, Kingston Penitentiary, and the Lunatic Asylum), her personality and the women living in these places change accordingly. The reader can see her behavioral transformation. The paper also sheds light on Atwood's portrayal of contrasting settings in the Canadian settlement that show the difference between the conventional setting, which espouses Victorian standards (Old World: Parkinson's household), and the more liberal setting, which rejects English societal conventions (New World: The Kinnear Estate). A thorough analysis of these different settings has proven them to be the cause of the characters' comfort or alienation, happiness, or sadness and has defined their positions, situation, and inner consciousness.

Article:

The importance of setting in novels is often overlooked, and this is due to the reader's focus on other literary components, such as hidden meanings in the text, character study, and narration. However, Jerry J. Watson states that it is essential to understand "how the setting may aid the interpretation of all the components in a holistic manner" (638). To appreciate the nature of setting, readers must thoroughly understand its role as being a fundamental part of the story, as it defines the mood and situation of the characters. There are two types of setting, backdrop and integral. According to Rebecca J. Lukens et al., backdrop setting refers to the place and time of a text that have little influence on plot, characters, or theme. This kind of setting may be found in traditional literature, wherein the events are not tied to specific time or place. Examples of such stories are Disney's *Cinderella* and *Winnie the Pooh*. However, integral setting is described in detail and is often found in realistic stories where historical periods are of importance. Watson also states that integral setting "exerts a great deal of influence upon the values, speech, and actions of characters" (638). This proves to be true for Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), in which the historical and sociocultural settings of the story play a significant role in our understanding of the events and the characters.

Atwood's *Alias Grace* is a historiographical metafiction postmodern novel, which focuses on the life of a sixteen-year-old Irish immigrant girl, Grace Marks, who in reality was a historical convicted notorious murderess in Victorian Canada.¹ In the story, Grace may be seen as displaced. She arrives in a foreign land hoping for a better home but is constantly menaced by the rules that govern the place. The different settings of the story highlight her weakness, accentuate the feebleness of her gender, and emphasize the discrimination that occurs between social classes, more specifically those belonging to an immigrant group. Told in a fragmented narrative, the events in the story do not follow a linear structure in time. Atwood jumps from one period of Grace's life to another, in a juggled-up manner, to portray Grace's unsettled inner state of consciousness. As the events of the novel unfold, readers become acquainted with Grace's life as a housemaid working in different households, then as a mentally unstable prisoner who is accused of assisting a hired man, James McDermott, in the killing of their employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper and mistress, Nancy Montgomery. However, Atwood fictionalizes some of the actual events in the story to emphasize certain thematic concerns, such as psychology, the New World versus the Old World, social classes, and the intricate web of class, gender, and identity.

Because of its success as a literary work that sheds light on the unearthed story of Grace Marks, *Alias Grace* was turned into a television miniseries in November 2017, consequently gaining more recognition around the world. In addition, the story's literary success instigated numerous studies that were and still are conducted on the novel and its film adaptation. These scholarship works cross-examine the biographical, political, and social reflection of the real Grace Marks and Susanna Moodie's journal *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1854), which is considered one of Atwood's most reliant sources in rewriting the fictional version of the story. Fascinated by the murderess's story, Moodie reportedly visited Grace in Kingston Penitentiary, where she imprisoned for sixteen years. In later research, it was claimed that Moodie fabricated many of the details of Grace's story, thus invalidating the credibility of her accounts.

Papers on *Alias Grace* are abundant.² However, after reviewing the numerous articles and books, as well as going through an extensive oeuvre of studies on Atwood's historical fiction, I have

¹ Coined by the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in 1987, historiographic metafiction is a work of fiction that relies on elements such as historical discourse, intertextuality, and allusions to portray historical occurrences and personages by merging them with a fictional plot.

² One such study on *Alias Grace* is Fiona Tolan's book, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007), in which she investigates the relationship between the progression of feminist discourse from 1960 to the present day and its influences on Atwood's major novels. In the chapter, "Alias Grace: Narrating the Self," Tolan focuses on the issue of narration and its reconstruction and recovering of lost female histories and giving voice to silenced women such as Grace Marks. In another article, "The Psychoanalytic Theme in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff" (2010), which is a response to Burkhard Niederhoff's discussion of the theme of restoration of near death ("The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace*" (2006)), Tolan examines the psychoanalytical study of the novel. Other studies are those of the well-known literary critic Coral Ann Howells, who has written extensively on Canadian women writers, including Atwood. In *Refiguring Identities: Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction* (2003) and *Where Are the Voices Coming From?: Canadian Culture and the Legacies of History* (2004), Howell draws attention to *Alias Grace*'s relation to several theoretical frameworks of feminism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism by focusing on the concept of Canadianness. She explores the complexity of the question of national identity to determine the changes that have taken place in Canadian

found that the function of setting as shaping and influencing the characters' behaviours and personalities to be under researched. I have also discovered from reading *Alias Grace* that Atwood attempts to shed light on the importance of the historical socio-cultural reality of nineteenth-century Canada as a place representing the New World. Throughout the novel, there are evident resemblances and differences between Victorian England (Old World) and Canada (New World) in their social conventions and traditions. Atwood focuses on showing how the time (nineteenth-century), place (Canada), and social environment of specific settings — Parkinson's household, the Kinnear Estate, Asylum and Kingston Prison — not only affect Grace's personality and attitude, but also shape and influence other major characters' behaviour, such as that of Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery.

Throughout *Alias Grace*, Atwood maintains a powerful perception of time and place by relying on historical details from non-fiction accounts of the life of the real Grace Marks and by setting the story in various nineteenth-century locations, such as urban and suburban locations around Canada to create and accentuate a realistic atmosphere for the readers. In her article, "*Alias Grace: An Astonishingly Timely Portrait of the Brutality of Powerlessness*" (2017), Zoe Williams explains that Atwood "knows the geography of her fictional environment inside out. She would never write the texture of her landscapes from imagination alone: and it tells in the way you remember the novels — in visual frames as much as in dialogue or in narration — and in the proposition they present for the screen, detailed, sumptuous and complete." Atwood integrates the history of the country and its several locations and depicts Grace as being threatened by settling in a new environment and the changes she goes through after leaving her Irish home.

First, this article will explain the importance of integral setting — time, place, and social environment — and examine it specifically in *Alias Grace* by relying on the four different functions of setting. Referential function operates in a way of giving the story the impression of reality-direct telling. The setting is one that contains references and allusions to real places. Verisimilitudinous function has mimetic qualities, in that it imitates reality and gives it spatial indicators that signify geographical references and locations. It is a way of implying the credibility or probability of the real setting to provide an element of realism in the narrative. Symbolic function has a didactic message—indirect telling by which it builds up an underlying meaning to the locations and places presented in the story and conveys a message. Analogical function establishes a comparison between setting and character. All four functions help to explain and indicate the effect of setting on the development of the female characters' personalities and behaviour in the story.

literature over the years. She also looks at both Anglophone and Francophone Canada by considering literary and film production in a comparative form between the novel and its film adaptation. In "Can We Believe What the Newspapers Tell Us?: Missing Links in *Alias Grace*" (1999), Judith Knelman discusses the actual happenings reported in newspaper articles and the story of Grace Marks, and in "Intertexts of Atwood's *Alias Grace*" (2000), Hilde Steels examines the novel's use of narration and literary mode. Amelia Defalco's "Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*" (2006) also discusses the novel's concern with human bodies by giving an overview of the theoretical foundations of the supernatural and stressing the shared concept of boundary transgression.

Second, by analysing the setting and its function, this essay will show how Atwood portrays Canada's societal conventions, both adoption and rejection of Victorian standards, as shaping and perhaps controlling the characters' development, psychology, and behaviour. Finally, my argument will prove that Canadian settings such as Mrs. Alderman's Parkinson's household and the Governor's house espouse Victorian traditional social values, which shape and influence Grace's character development into submissiveness and Mary's character into defiance. In contrast, other Canadian settings, represented in Thomas Kinnear's household, the Kingston Penitentiary, and the Asylum, adopt unconventional patterns due to their loose hold on Victorian traditions and are places that have transformed Grace into a defiant villainous antihero and Nancy into a fallen woman. Since Atwood uses place as a cause for Grace's comfort or alienation, this argument will also define the heroine's position, situation, and inner social consciousness as an Irish immigrant and what she has transformed into (possibly a historicized antihero) because of the different settings in nineteenth-century Canadian grounds.

Atwood particularizes two general locations, Canada and Ireland, to indicate the difference between a difficult life in the Old World and the supposedly better one in the New World. More specifically, Atwood differentiates between several disparate locales in the same geographical setting of Canada to accentuate their effect on the characters. In *How Novels Work* (2006), John Mullan explains that it is important to distinguish between a *location*, which is a known place, and a *setting*, which moulds a character according to its customs (197). He states, "If the location can be particularized, the psychology takes root" (196). The projection of a particularized setting allows the readers to discover a sense of place. Atwood does so by conjuring specific settings, recognizable by the readers, that represent the localities of Canada and Ireland and that shape the characters of the stories.

Due to its nature as a historiographical fiction, the reading of *Alias Grace* should include consideration of the socio-cultural and historical meaning of nineteenth-century Canadian past. Set during the Victorian Era, the story conveys the situation of Ireland as witnessing a difficult period known as the Great Famine, a time when immigrants considered Canada, in comparison to New America, a less expensive journey across the Atlantic. Set during the Victorian Era, the story conveys the situation of Ireland as witnessing a difficult period known as the Great Famine, a time when immigrants considered Canada, in comparison to New America, a less expensive journey across the Atlantic. (Grace arrives in Canada three years into Victoria's reign and five years before the Famine begins.) The main setting of the story, Canada, was also known as the New World. It provided many of the Irish immigrants, who were fleeing their homes from starvation, poverty and oppression of their ruthless landlords, a chance at a better life, supposedly, filled with new opportunities. Canada's history as a colonized country is important. Having been ruled by both French and English colonialists since the fifteenth-century and later on by the British in 1763, Canada became part of the British

Commonwealth, and it is because of the British dominion over Canada in its politics, culture, and societal standards that the Canadians viewed their ethnic background as closely related to the English people. They followed many of its conventions and adopted their traditions and beliefs, and therefore considered themselves superior to other countries such as Ireland or America.

In the novel, Grace describes the people in Toronto as “very mixed as to the kinds of them, with many Scots and some Irish, and of course the English, and many Americans, and a few French; and Red Indians ... and some Germans; ... and you never could tell what sort of speech you were going to hear” (Atwood 124). Since Canada is inhabited by aboriginals and people of diverse nationalities, Atwood ensures that Grace’s referential description resembles the real setting of Canada in the mid-1800s and convinces the reader of the imitation of reality. In this referential and verisimilitudinous setting, Grace is portrayed as an Irish immigrant of a lower working class family belonging to, as Maria J. Lopez puts it, the “marginal communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people, who share strong bonds of solidarity based upon vulnerability and secrecy and who challenge the rigidity of social categories, together with official middle- and upper-class constructions of national identity” (157). In addition, in “Racism and Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England” (1990), Anthony S. Wohl describes the Irish as “inferior, [of] a lower evolutionary order, degeneracy, or criminality.” In a society such as this, Grace’s social and professional standing is reflective of the position and situation of women during the time and are defined by gender roles, socioeconomic status, and the power of sexuality. The community regards women of lower social standing as weakly built and best suited to the domestic sphere under a patriarchal rigid system. This submissive position gave their male relatives substantial power over their lives. Grace Marks is an example of such women, yet she is even less fortunate since she belongs to an Irish lower-class working family. Due to her social status and ethnic background, and according to Atwood’s portrayal, Grace’s position is shaped by Canada’s setting. Consequently, Grace has three options in her new social environment: work as servant, marry and be taken care of by a man, or become a prostitute, thus endorsing the claim that the Irish people are a degenerate race.

The first location shaping Grace and Mary’s characters is Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s home, which is located in the city where the Canadian settlement and civilization has flourished, “the house of my new employment was very grand, and was known as one of the finest houses in Toronto. It was situated on Front Street, overlooking the Lake, where there were many other big houses” (Atwood 147). In this household, there is a strong indication of the Old World of Victorian England and adherence to the English customs and traditions, as “Mrs. Alderman Parkinson had very strict views” (173). The referential and verisimilitudinous function of the household establishes a sense of reality and the way the household is run enforces its inhabitants to abide by its rules. When Grace is hired, Mrs. Honey, the family’s housekeeper, instructs her to follow the protocols of the house: to be made presentable, to dress decently, to behave modestly and to perform her duties accurately. Grace also

notices that the servants follow strict instructions to “always ... use the back stairs, in order to keep out of the way of the family, but in truth it was the other way around: the front stairs were there so that the family would keep out of [the servants’] way” (158). This setting follows Victorian norms. Through the Parkinson family and their lifestyle, Atwood criticises the Victorian rigid class structure and the way the conventions of governing classes are signifiers of power and disempowerment.

George Parkinson uses his social status as a sense of entitlement and an identity marker to exploit those beneath him in social status. When he impregnates Mary Whitney, the house maid and Grace’s best friend, we see a clear emphasis on the imbalance of class structure due to the patriarchal dominance of the Victorian setting. George’s failure to take responsibility for his action illustrates morally unacceptable behaviour endorsed by the Old World and George’s fear of society.

More notably, George’s mother, Mrs. Parkinson, avoids acknowledging that her son breaks the code of ethics and conduct by having an adulterous relationship with the maid. She demands that the other housemaids conceal this indecent secret, and she even instructs Grace to swear on the Bible that she never reveals the name of the gentleman who impregnated Mary. Even though manners in nineteenth-century Victorian social environments represented the essential ideals of the Christian religion in general and promoted benevolence and peace in a civilized community at large, they were nevertheless misused by people like Mrs. Parkinson and her son, in fear of ruining their social reputation. Gertrude Himmelfarb states, “the Victorians thought it no small virtue to maintain the appearance, the manner, of good conduct even while violating some basic percept of morality” (223). This proves to be true for the Parkinsons, who encourage the cultivation of manners over morals while ignoring the laws of the religion they follow. This interpretation informs the Victorian background, a setting that nurtures oppressive and abusive manners on behalf of the upper class, thus exploiting the insubordinate classes by situating them in a marginalized position and shaping their behaviour and character into submissiveness.

Mrs. Parkinson’s validation of Victorian culture affects the place, her house, thus impacting the behaviour and the perception of the people living in it, thus affecting their behaviour, personality, and values. In his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (2001), Yi-Fu Tuan asks, “What gives a place its identity, its aura?” (4). One of his notable answers is culture. Culture, according to Tuan, gives meaning to place since it is “uniquely developed in human beings. It strongly influences human behaviour and values” (5). Upon Mrs. Parkinson’s discovery of Mary’s dead body covered in blood, she says, “Under my own roof, what a deceitful girl” (Atwood 177). The phrase “under my own roof” signifies the Parkinsons’ household, which takes on the realistic function of the supposedly conventional setting that Grace lives in. Mrs. Parkinson, described by Grace as an “imposing figure,” prizes Victorian propriety and culture. She regards reputation to be of great importance and is determined to ensure that this ideology is endorsed in her own household. Grace’s personality is affected by the Parkinsons’ setting, and the reader senses this effect in her sessions with Dr. Simon

Jordon. Her narration of Mary's tragic story is told in retrospect, when Grace is around thirty-three years old. The dutiful, naïve sixteen-year old Grace was compliant with the rules of the house. Agnes, the chambermaid, describes her as obedient and "doing as she was told" (177). However, Grace changes into a more critical and aggressive person who develops a different and more defiant perception of how the dynamics of upper social class societies are run. Grace criticises George's character and sense of entitlement granted to him by the social environment he lives in, and this critique shows her character development and represents her newly found radical defiance of societal norms. She finally realizes that the Canadian society, similar to the Victorians, punishes fallen women, like Mary, who violate the social codes while failing to condemn male sexual transgression.³

Even though Atwood portrays Grace's character as affected by the Parkinson's social environment, she creates a contrasting character by using Mary, who rejects the engrained notions of the class system and the hypocritical idea of proper conduct. Mary, "a person of democratic views," is a native-born Canadian with a Red-Indian grandmother (35). Her different ethnic and Canadian background are two factors that have affected and shaped her identity. Her thoughts are transgressive and represent the democratic ideas of those supporting the cause of the Rebellion (which was run by the Radical group and led by William Lyon Mackenzie). For example, Mary does not have much respect for degree, holds strong convictions about gender and class inequality, and refuses to be subjected to social discriminations. Her views on the gentry class "who ran everything and kept all the money and land for themselves" (148) are that "... they are feeble and ignorant creatures, although rich" (158). Mary's opinion clearly embodies the new Canadian identity that is influenced by the progressive environment she has been born into. Her defiant personality contrasts with Grace's, and her "importance in the narrative seems to lie in the fact that her radical political beliefs and her irreverent attitude to her supposed betters, make her the opposite of the naïve and dutiful Grace" (Mcdermott 121). However, Mary's radical beliefs turn against her. They pave the way for the illicit affair she has with George Parkinson and cause her downfall and ruin as a sinful woman who "no decent man would marry" and who is forced "to go on the streets, and become a sailors' drab" (173).

If we look at *Alias Grace* chronologically, a change in Grace's behaviour and personality is noticed once she moves from the conservative setting of Parkinsons' household to the liberal environment of Thomas Kinnear's house. Situated past the edge of Richmond Hill village, a remote location in the suburb of Toronto, the house is where Grace learns new mannerisms that lack moral restraints. It contrasts to the Parkinsons' home as it is far away from society, hidden from the public view, and does not follow any old-fashioned Victorian standards. Grace describes the place, saying: "I have often thought that all would have gone better if there had been a separate staircase for the

³ According to the article "Rescue of Fallen Women," "a 'fallen woman could be a prostitute (occasional or professional), or a woman who had had sex out of wedlock, whether voluntary or against her will – in short, a woman who transgressed Victorian sexual norms. 'Falleness' was associated with a downward spiral that began with sex and led to loss of social position, ruin, and death" (The British Library).

servants at the back of the house, as was usual; but there was none. And that meant we were all obliged to live too close together, and in one another's pockets" (256). Grace clearly finds it peculiar to be living in a house where the master and his servants are in close proximity because it is not customary in a traditional household. At first, she is baffled with this system, but gradually begins to comprehend its unorthodoxy. Thomas Kinnear, a rather loose character, is described by Grace as "a kind enough master [...] and liberal when he wished to be" (308) and "never a man to pay any attention to gossip, as he didn't care a pin what other people said about him. He had his own money and was not running for political office, and could afford to ignore such things" (207). Grace's description of Kinnear signifies his reputation as a womanizer, refers, sometimes, to his flirtatious behaviour toward Grace and emphasizes his unaccepted relationship with his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Kinnear's unconventional lifestyle is reflective of the location of his house. Similar to the house's isolation from society and its rules, his illicit affair with Nancy defies the traditional norms and is unethical. By breaking Victorian morality, Kinnear ensures that those living under his roof and working for him are influenced to breaking it too.

An example of defiance is seen in the character of Nancy. According to Victorian religious norms, Nancy lives a life of sin; churchgoers and people in her neighbourhood regard her as a prostitute. Nancy's description in the poem in Chapter 2 of the novel depicts her as a "no well-born lady" and "no queen, / And yet she goes in satin and silk, / The finest was ever seen" (11). Her persona fits that of a fallen woman, since she takes on the prostitution role. However, she is in a privileged position; her master allows her more advantages. She runs and manages his household, shares his meals and his bed, all due to the sexual duties she provides him. By depicting her as someone who exploits her circumstances, Atwood shows that some women of lower social standing are easily influenced by men's desires and willingly accept their master's sexual advances. Interestingly, Nancy echoes Mary's character; both women submit to the socially determined role of the fallen woman and are products of gender/class oppression enforced by their social environment.

Because the Kinnear Estate is deprived of rigid rules that conform to the Victorian setting, Grace's displacement and alienation are evident. Her duty as a housemaid in this new environment is different from that of the ascribed role she had at the Parkinsons' household. Grace's personality was confined to the dutiful, naïve immigrant servant because of the orderly manner the place was run in. However, her position and change of character in the Kinnear household is affected by the non-traditional setting of the place. They are more derogatory and threatened by the social environment. Grace becomes defiant and aggressive. Her new persona, which shows insubordination, is prompted by Nancy's consumption of feelings of jealousy, emotions she is not entitled to by law, as she is not Kinnear's wife. Grace explains, "I have thought since that the reason for all [Nancy's] fussing was that she did not wish to leave me by myself in Mr. Kinnear's room alone" (221). At first, Grace is confused as to why Nancy may be too agitated regarding her domestic duties. It becomes clearer later on that

Nancy purposefully belittles Grace's cleverness to show superiority, enforce control, and assure that Grace understands in a subtle way that Kinnear is hers: "And he said to Nancy, This girl is not simpleton after all; by which I guessed she had been telling that I was one. And Nancy looked daggers at me" (223). The reader senses an obvious tension when Nancy sees Grace as a threat, someone who may take her place as Kinnear's mistress because of his praise of Grace. And so, Nancy dissociates herself from Grace by enforcing her superior position in her master's home.

Upon her realization of a possible illicit affair between her employer and his housekeeper, Grace loses respect for Nancy, whom she initially looked up to as a substitute for her lost friend, Mary, "I thought we would be like sisters or at least good friends, the two of us working together side by side, as I had done with Mary Whitney. Now I knew that this was not the way things were going to be" (223). Even though Nancy is a vague reminder of Mary, there is a difference between both these women's relationship with Grace. Mary protected and mentored Grace in an environment foreign to the Irish immigrant and allowed her to feel the harmony of sisterhood, while Nancy made her feel oppressed and victimized in a more aggressive social place. Grace's loss of respect for Nancy is due to Nancy's ill-reputed status: "I am sorry to say ... I lost much of the respect I'd once felt for Nancy, as being older, and the mistress of the house; and I let my scorn show, and answered her back more than was wise, and there were arguments between us which came to raised voices" (256). This sort of antagonistic behaviour signifies her feelings of being threatened, endangered, and mistreated because of her professional status as a maid.

In *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, setting is described to "reveal or even shape a character's personality, outlook, and values; it can occasionally be an actor in the plot; and it often prompts characters' actions" (Mays 285). In the opening lines of the novel, Atwood portrays the garden in Kinnear's Estate, and this setting holds a symbolic function because of the deeper figurative meaning it holds. Through Grace's eyes, we are given a description of peonies, a flower often used by Atwood to symbolize women and their status, specifically that of Nancy and Grace. What is interesting about the scene is the way Grace makes a cross comparison between the red peonies found in the Kinnear garden and artificial white ones that she sees in a present time, probably in the Governor's house.⁴ Strangely, Grace sees red peonies growing up from gravel, but she is aware that these flowers only grow and flourish at a different time of year and in a different soil ground, "I know they shouldn't be here: it's April, and peonies don't bloom in April. There are three more now, right in front of me, growing out of the path itself. Furtively I reach out my hand to touch one. It has a dry feel, and I realize it's made of cloth" (Atwood 5-6). Peonies usually grow in a well-drained soil; however, in the

⁴ The discrepancy of the time shifts between present and past may confuse the reader at first. Atwood uses the structure of fragmentation to challenge the reader to piece together the different components of Grace's story and make sense of it. This distorted view of the storyline highlights the different settings that Grace remembers as having an impact on her memory and storytelling, which in return affects her personality and behaviour.

first sentence of Chapter 1, they are described as growing out of the gravel, a stony soil that is not suitable for these fragile flowers, thus insinuating the displacement and alienation of women. The significance of the setting draws the reader's attention to the sense of unorthodoxy felt in Kinnear's household, which is situated far away from society, as explained before. Symbolically, the peonies may symbolize women and their position in society, while the gravel represents the kind of environment where women must show perseverance. In addition, the reader can see a dual image in a comparison between Grace and the peonies or Nancy and the peonies. In the first comparison, Grace is a displaced Irish immigrant working in an unorthodox household, and in the second comparison, Nancy is a displaced mistress in the New World environment.

The prison and the asylum are two spatial places in *Alias Grace* that Grace inhabits after leaving Kinnear's Estate. Both settings have verisimilitudinous and analogical functions because first they mimic the historical places, Kingston Penitentiary and the Provincial Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, and second, they are analogical representation of desperate human existence and possible negative destinies respectively. In "The Traps: Bukowski as Interpreter of Cornered Lives" (2008), Marc Brosseau discusses the theme of existential traps and how these traps are "inherently spatial" in novels and short stories, genres that relate to the representation of place (380). His idea of traps can be seen in the settings discussed. Grace's life has been crushed by circumstance of being in a setting that traps her in the role of a murderess, and so she becomes imprisoned in a hopeless situation. The prison and asylum restrict the possibility of her personal freedom and control her future through alienation and oppression. They also highlight the physical and social elements of the social environments that alter her behaviour through the experience of place. Through the prison and the asylum, Atwood draws attention to the exploration of the spatial politics of identity and representation in a variety of settings that are depictions of the real places of Grace's story.

The Kingston Penitentiary, where Grace is held prisoner, makes her feel threatened. The prison, according to *Correctional Service Canada*, is the first penitentiary in Kingston, built in 1835. Inmates were exposed to very harsh treatment and abuse. For instance, they were forced to endure long hours of confinement, hard labour, and very little food and water. Women and children were sometimes beaten and put in chains as a form of punishment. Grace gives a similar description of the prison, specifically of the room where she was held prisoner as having "only a little window high up with bars on the inside" (Atwood 31). In addition, she describes vividly the conditions of the prison:

Nobody comes. I'm being left to reflect on my sins and misdemeanours ... In solitary confinement, and sometimes in the dark. There are prisons where they keep you in there for years, without a glimpse of a tree or horse or human face. No supper last night or the night before that, nothing except the bread, not even a bit of cabbage; well that is to be expected ... yesterday's water is all gone and I'm very thirsty, I am dying for thirst, my mouth tastes

bruised, my tongue is swelling. That's what happens to castaways. Once you start feeling sorry for yourself they've got you where they want you. Then they send for the chaplain. (34-35)

According to Grace's account, the prison is a place of reform; however, it is controlled by an extremely rigid patriarchal authority. Grace was sexually abused because of her passiveness and submission. Like her other inmates, she is forced by the authorities to behave in an obedient manner to ensure her safety and her survival in an assaultive ambiance. The prison superiors manipulate and prohibit her from fully exercising her right to communicate her feelings, reveal her story, or even make sense of her life and experience. Grace's ability to narrate this part of her story to Simon Jordon allows us, and her, to understand that the changes in her personality and the reasons for these changes are due to her comprehension of her position in prison, which is one of powerlessness.

Grace experiences similar hostile treatment in the asylum where she is institutionalised for her hysterias and mental instabilities. In the mental institution, she goes through an unsettling transformation due to the brutal and restraining atmosphere of the place. Her character in the asylum changes drastically in comparison to her personalities in the previous settings, which are considered less disturbing. She is expected to show signs of aggression, madness, lunacy, and insanity since she is considered to be a "celebrated murderess" (22). Atwood documents Susanna Moodie's accounts of Grace in one of the epigraphs, a "singular face ... [who is] lighted up with fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment. On perceiving that strangers were observing her, she fled shrieking away like a phantom ... It appears that even in the wildest bursts of her terrible malady, she is continually haunted ..." (45). When Simon Jordan confronts Grace with Moodie's description of her, she defends herself by explaining that she does "not recall behaving in a violent manner towards others, unless they did so first to [her]" (359). Grace's defence proves that visitors of the asylum expected her to behave madly. It also emphasizes the fact that women's lunatic behaviour is influenced by the asylum and observed and evaluated according to the standards of the mental institution's societal propriety. Even though, in her meeting with Simon Jordan, Grace appears to be composed and completely sane, she is aware that the matrons in the asylum "would provoke [the inmates], especially right before the visitors were to come to show how dangerous [they] were" (32). This treatment puts her in a position in which she is forced to be shaped by the nature of the asylum into outlining her mental instability.

By moving across the Atlantic, Grace is hopeful for a better life, yet ironically, her excursion through different settings turns into one complicated and horrific ordeal with her incarceration as a murderess. Every new setting Grace resides in influences her behaviour and shapes her into the many different personas, or aliases, as signified by the title of the novel.

Patricia F. Goldblatt, in "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists" (1999), explains, "we can only be sure that the young innocent who arrived on Canada's shores penniless and motherless has been altered by the necessity to cope with a destructive hierarchical society

unsympathetic to an immigrant girl. Rather than persist and be tossed forever at the whim of a wizened world, each saddened young girl moves to reconstruct her tarnished image of herself" (280). This fact perfectly describes the effect of the different settings Grace inhabits. The changes Grace goes through are evident; she becomes aware of the social dynamics of the places that alienate her. She learns that as a woman, society forces her to take the role of the obedient, dutiful woman. Each of the settings limits her presence, threatens her with the feelings of otherness, and shapes her into different personalities.

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